DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 221 CS 210 446

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TITLE Trading Places: Reader Reactions to the Knoxville Newspaper Switch.
PUB DATE Aug 87
NOTE 29p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (70th, San Antonio, TX, August 1-4, 1987). Funding for this research provided by the College of Communications and the Office of Research, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Analysis; *Mass Media Effects; Media Research; *Newspapers; *Reading Habits; Reading Materials; Recreational Reading
IDENTIFIERS *Readership Analysis; Tennessee (Knoxville)

ABSTRACT

In July 1986 the "Knoxville Journal" (a Gannett newspaper) changed its publication time from morning to afternoon and the "Knoxville News-Sentinel" (a Scripps-Howard newspaper) changed from afternoon to morning. One month later, researchers surveyed by telephone 505 newspaper subscribing households to examine reader opinions and loyalties in the wake of the change. Results indicated that nearly 5% of the sample households canceled their subscriptions, 15% switched newspapers to retain their old delivery time, and only 15% were satisfied with the change. The morning newspaper experienced fewer cancellations, and a larger proportion of the sample changed from afternoon delivery to morning delivery. Readers with morning delivery indicated that they spread their reading throughout the day, while readers with afternoon delivery concentrated their reading in the afternoon and evening. Subscribers' evaluations of the editorial attributes of the papers were not significantly related to newspaper choice. Findings confirmed the conventional wisdom that morning newspapers are in a stronger marketing position than afternoon newspapers. (NKA)

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Trading Places: Reader Reactions to the Knoxville Newspaper Switch

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Accepted for presentation to the Newspaper Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication for presentation at the Annual Conference, San Antonio, Texas, August, 1987. The authors wish to thank the College of Communications and the Research Incentive Fund of the Office of Research at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, for supporting this research.

CS210446

Trading Places: Reader Reactions to the Knoxville Newspaper Switch

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ABSTRACT

In August, 1986, one month after the Knoxville Journal changed its publication time from morning to afternoon and the Knoxville News-Sentinel changed from afternoon to morning, researchers surveyed 505 subscribing households by telephone. The data collected indicate that almost five percent of the sample canceled their subscriptions, 15 percent switched newspapers to retain their old delivery time, and only 15 percent were "glad" the switch occurred. The morning paper had fewer cancellations and a larger proportion switched to it. Readers with morning delivery spread their reading throughout the day, while readers with afternoon delivery concentrated their reading in the afternoon and evening. Readers' evaluations of editorial attributes of the papers were not significantly related to readers' choices of newspapers.

Trading Places: Reader Reaction to the Knoxville Newspaper Switch

Are newspaper readers loyal to a specific newspaper or do they simply read whatever newspaper comes at a convenient time? Under normal circumstances this question is difficult to answer. Most newspaper readers cannot assess the degree to which loyalty or habit determines their reading behavior, nor can they accurately answer hypothetical questions asking them to choose between retaining their usual newspaper at a different time or getting a different newspaper at their usual time.

The switch of publication cycles of the two Knoxville, Tennessee, daily newspapers on June 30, 1986, forced readers actually to make such a choice. The switch provided a unique opportunity for research on the habits and loyalties of newspaper readers. The research reported here sheds light on the relative importance of newspaper readers' loyalties and habits and their motivations in general.

This research also is relevant to trends in American newspapers such as the failure of newspaper circulation to keep pace with population increases and the tendency of afternoon circulation growth to trail morning circulation growth. These trends concern both scholars interested in the changing role of newspapers in society and newspaper executives who may have to choose among closing an afternoon paper, converting it to the morning, or competing in the declining afternoon market.

The change in publication times of the Knoxville newspapers resulted when Gannett, then owner of the Knoxville Journal, and Scripps-Howard, owner of the Knoxville News-Sentinel, renegotiated a

joint operating agreement that had been in force since 1957. Under the arrangement Scripps-Howard owned the plant and managed advertising, production and distribution for both papers. Since Gannett acquired the Journal in 1981, the paper's circulation had increased by several thousand to nearly 60,000. In the same period, News-Sentinel circulation dropped slightly to just more than 90,000.

Apparently Scripps-Howard insisted on converting the News-Sentinel to a morning publication, leaving Gannett with the choice of building a new plant or switching the Journal to the afternoon. Gannett agreed to switch the Journal in exchange for an increased share of advertising revenue and concessions under a joint operating agreement in El Paso, Texas, which was renegotiated concurrently. After the switch, Gannett sold the Journal to former employees.

Because the Knoxville newspaper switch was unique, prior research offered few hints of what to expect. However, that research does suggest issues to be addressed.

Among the most conspicuous trends in American newspapers is the relative strength of circulation growth in the morning. Assuming that this trend reflects a general preference of readers for the morning paper, it is reasonable to suppose that readers whose paper moves from the afternoon to the morning will be less upset by the switch than readers whose paper moves the other direction.

Commentators often attribute the relative strength of morning papers to changes in American lifestyles.[1] Morning papers are thought to better serve white collar workers. The reasoning is that these workers tend to begin their jobs later in the day and to have greater information needs. In contrast, afternoon papers are thought to serve blue collar workers better because their leisure time is in

the afternoon and their jobs do not demand high levels of information. Therefore, socioeconomic status may be associated both with satisfaction when newspapers change position and with the likelihood of readers changing papers to retain customary reading times.

Published studies of conversion of papers from afternoon to morning show that readers generally remain loyal to their papers and that they tend to read more in the morning.[2] However, readers of converted papers continue to do a substantial portion of their reading in the afternoon. In fact, frequently people who get morning papers that have not converted read those papers in the afternoon. The percentage of people reading afternoon papers in the morning is far lower.[3]

All reported studies have been of PM-to-AM conversions so they provide little insight into how readers will respond when their paper converts in the other direction. Also, prior conversions have not left afternoon readers with the choice of a viable, local afternoon paper. Therefore, it is uncertain whether prior conversion studies can be generalized to the Knoxville situation.

Newspapers enjoy advantages specific to their time slots. Essentially, morning papers can be more complete in their coverage of yesterday's news while afternoon papers can be fresher with today's news and more analytic with yesterday's news. With regard to completeness, the only official content change when the Knoxville newspapers traded times was listing of stock exchanges prices. The exchanges close too late for afternoon deadlines, so the listings remained with the morning paper. Also, coverage of sports events, which generally occur in the afternoon or evening, obviously can be

more timely in a morning paper. Prior research indicates that readers are not particularly aware of these content differences between AM and PM papers.[4]

Any major change in a community's newspapers can be expected to lead to disruption of normal subscription patterns. When newspaper readers face a real choice between changing papers and changing time slots, many possibilities arise. This research investigates such possibilities.

Method and Results

Data were gathered via telephone interviews with a sample drawn from current subscription lists within the Knoxville telephone exchange. Interviewing began Aug. 4, about a month after the papers traded times, and ended Sept. 6. Both papers have substantial circulations outside the local exchange. Though this may limit the generalizability of the sample, there is little reason to presume that readers outside the exchange would behave in a systematically different way.[5]

Interviews were completed with 505 respondents. After elimination of inappropriate numbers (those no longer in service, business phones, etc.), the response rate was 76 percent. Demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Inspection of the table shows a slight overrepresentation of women and the elderly. The relatively high figures for the upper income levels and the college educated are plausible given that Knoxville is the home of a major state university, headquarters for the Tennessee Valley Authority, and near the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Also, newspaper reading is highest in such groups.[6]

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Table 1 About Here

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The interviews began by asking, "Do you read a daily newspaper regularly?" The eight percent who answered "no" were asked if they had read a Knoxville newspaper before the switch. Of these, 25 percent (almost 5 percent of the total sample) said they had canceled their subscriptions because of the switch in publication times. About half of the people who said they canceled because of the switch stopped reading. The rest said they remained regular readers, apparently with single-copy purchases or pass-along copies. The non-readers who did not cancel because of the switch apparently were non-reading persons in households that got a paper and persons in households that had canceled for other reasons.

When asked about reading the local papers, 48 percent said they regularly read the Journal and 86 percent said they regularly read the News-Sentinel. The high figure for the News-Sentinel may be due to the nature of subscriptions offered by the papers. A standard subscription package includes the six-day-a-week Journal and the Sunday News-Sentinel. Therefore, a fair fraction of the respondents whose primary paper is the Journal probably do, indeed, regularly read the News-Sentinel.

Of the Journal readers, 80 percent got home delivery, and 90 percent of the News-Sentinel readers got home delivery. The rest apparently were pass-along readers or single-copy purchasers.

Of the whole sample, 15 percent reported switching papers -- 56 percent to the News-Sentinel and 44 percent to the Journal. This ratio is yet another indicator of the relative strength of morning

newspapers. Not only did a larger number switch to the morning time slot but also a much larger proportion. The Journal entered the switch with a circulation level about two-thirds as large as that of the News-Sentinel.

To investigate relationships among the variables, regular newspaper readers (n=465) were classified into four groups indicating their subscription status:

1. Those who stayed with the Journal (27 percent).
2. Those who switched to the Journal from the News-Sentinel (7 percent).
3. Those who stayed with the News-Sentinel (57 percent).
4. Those who switched to the News-Sentinel from the Journal (9 percent).

Regular readers of both papers were put in the category of their preferred paper. Numbers in tables vary because of missing data.

Time of Reading

The crosstabulation of responses to a question asking if readers had changed "the time of day you read" is shown in Table 2. The pattern in this table is clear. Readers who switched newspapers were more likely to retain their old reading time than were readers who stayed with their old paper when it moved to a different time. Loyal Journal readers were 35 percent more likely to report changing their reading time than were loyal News-Sentinel readers.

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Table 2 About Here

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In addition to respondents' reported changes in time of reading, the questionnaire asked if respondents read "always," "usually,"

"sometimes," "rarely" or "never" in early morning, late morning, early afternoon, late afternoon, early evening, and late evening. Respondents were allowed to indicate multiple reading times.

From these questions a variable was constructed indicating whether respondents were reading their papers at the new time of delivery or not. For example, Journal readers were scored as reading at delivery time if they reported always or usually reading in either late afternoon or early evening, and News-Sentinel readers were scored as reading at delivery time if they reported always or usually reading in either early morning or late morning. The crosstabulation of this variable by subscription status is shown in Table 3.

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Table 3 About Here

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This table indicates that Journal readers were far more likely than News-Sentinel readers to read their papers at the new delivery time -- regardless of whether the readers had stayed with a paper or switched to it.

Failure to read at the new delivery time does not necessarily imply that readers continued to read at the old delivery time. To examine the possibility that subscribers retained the habit of reading at the pre-switch delivery time, a variable indicating frequency of reading at old delivery time was created in a manner analogous to the variable above. This variable, broken down by reader status, is shown in Table 4. Though this table does not indicate a statistically significant difference by conventional standards, it does show a slight trend for News-Sentinel subscribers

to read more frequently at the old time more than for Journal subscribers.

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Table 4 About Here

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Subscribers who stayed with their papers after the switch might have begun the habit of reading at the new delivery time but might miss the paper at the old delivery time and read it again. Only ten readers reported reading the same newspaper twice a day. While this number is too small to allow firm conclusions, nine of the ten were subscribers who remained loyal to their pre-switch paper.

Most of the differences in reading time shown above are attributable to the paper being read. Whether a reader has been loyal to a paper or has recently switched to it appears to make little difference. Frequency of reading may have a greater impact on the time of day the newspaper is read. To examine this possibility, readers were categorized into four groups, based upon their frequency and exclusivity of reading.

1. Persons who read neither paper as often as five days a week (26 percent).
2. Persons who read the Journal at least five days a week and read the News-Sentinel less often (15 percent).
3. Persons who read the News-Sentinel at least five days a week and read the Journal less often (40 percent).
4. Persons who read both papers at least five days a week (19 percent).

When this variable was crosstabulated by time of delivery, an obvious pattern emerged. Not surprisingly, persons who read both

papers regularly showed a very strong tendency to read them at the time of delivery and persons who read neither paper regularly did not. Also, regular Journal readers were substantially more likely to read at time of delivery than were regular News-Sentinel readers.

The table for reading at the old delivery time resulted in a reversed pattern, except that irregular readers of both papers tended not to read at this time either. Taken together, Tables 5 and 6 clearly show that the afternoon paper is much more likely to be read at its time of delivery than the morning paper.

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Tables 5-6 About Here

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Opinion of the Switch

In response to a question that asked, "Overall, what is your opinion of the switch?," 15 percent of the readers said they were "happy," 44 percent said they were "unhappy" and 41 percent said they "don't really care." This variable was not associated with reader status, but, as shown in Table 7, it was associated with reading frequency. Readers of the Journal were far more likely to be unhappy with the switch. Interestingly, almost half of the readers of both papers were unhappy with it. Such readers might have strong habits concerning the time of day they look for specific newspaper features and be upset by having those habits disrupted.

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Table 7 About Here

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The disruption of delivery service that accompanied the switch could account for some of the readers' displeasure. Some 19 percent

of Journal readers and 7 percent of News-Sentinel readers reported dissatisfaction with delivery service. More than 90 percent of the readers who were glad the switch occurred were also satisfied with delivery service. Unhappiness over the switch appeared to be associated more with delivery service dissatisfaction among Journal readers than among News-Sentinel readers. Of Journal readers, 27 percent were both unhappy about the switch and dissatisfied with delivery service, compared with 10 percent of News-Sentinel readers.

Newspaper Attributes

The questionnaire asked respondents to evaluate "some reasons people give for liking one newspaper more than another" and to indicate if these newspaper attributes were "very important, somewhat important, or not very important in your choice of newspapers." The percentage endorsing each attribute as "very important," by reader status, is shown in Table 8.

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Table 8 About Here

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Only two attributes were significantly related to reader status. Time of delivery was substantially more important to readers who switched to the News-Sentinel than to those who stayed with it. However, there was very little difference between those who stayed with the Journal and those who switched to it. Retaining morning delivery apparently was a very important motivation for switching to the News-Sentinel, but retaining afternoon delivery made little difference to Journal readers.

"Attractive appearance" was the other attribute associated significantly with reader status. Readers loyal to both papers rated

this attribute higher than those who switched. Perhaps this indicates a motivation to stay with the familiar, although the two papers are run on the same presses and are similar in format.

None of the attributes indicative of qualities of news coverage (national, sports, business, and local) was associated significantly with reader status, nor was there a consistent pattern across them. Thus, the evidence supports earlier findings that readers are not aware of news advantages associated with time slot.

Demographics and Switching Papers

As noted above, afternoon newspapers may be better suited to blue-collar workers and morning papers to white-collar workers because blue-collar workers tend to go to work earlier and so have more leisure time in the afternoon than do white-collar workers. Also, white-collar workers have a more pressing need for current news in the performance of their duties than do blue-collar workers.

This implies that readers in the upper income levels should have remained loyal to the News-Sentinel or switched to the News-Sentinel when it moved to the morning. To test this proposition, reader status was crosstabulated by family income dichotomized at $30,000 a year as shown in Table 9.

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Table 9 About Here

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As expected, readers who remained with the Journal tended to be in the lower income group by an appreciable margin while readers remaining with the News-Sentinel tended to be in the higher income

group by a slight margin. However, readers who switched to the Journal also tended to come from the higher income group.

A similar analysis with education as the indicator of socioeconomic status (not shown here) revealed essentially the same pattern but was not statistically significant at conventional levels.

Sex of respondent was the only other demographic variable found to be associated with reader status. This finding, shown in Table 10, is problematic. While the analysis indicates that men are more likely to report switching than are women, the reasons for this are unclear. If the newspaper chosen is a household decision, it is difficult to see why the sex of the person interviewed within household should be related to reader status.

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Table 10 About Here

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It is possible that men really are more likely to switch but that there are more households in which there are no men. Therefore, households with men would be more likely to switch and to yield male respondents than would households in which there are only women. This also would explain why the sample tended to overrepresent women, who are more likely to be living alone, and the elderly.

Summary and Discussion

By a variety of criteria, the findings confirm the conventional wisdom that morning newspapers are in a stronger position than afternoon newspapers. These include:

1. A smaller portion of readers canceled the paper that switched to morning delivery than canceled the paper that switched to afternoon delivery.

2. A larger portion of readers changed to the paper that switched to morning delivery than changed to the paper that switched to afternoon delivery.
3. The proportion of readers who were "unhappy" about the trade in publication times was smaller for the paper that switched to the morning than for the paper that switched to the afternoon.
4. Desirable higher-income readers tended to stay with or switch to the morning paper more than they stayed with or switched to the afternoon paper.

The times of day for reading the paper were substantially different for the morning and afternoon papers. Readers of the morning paper tended to spread their reading times throughout the day while readers of the afternoon paper concentrated their reading in the afternoon and evening. Because few people read the same paper twice a day, this suggests some morning paper readers were happy reading at time of delivery while others were content to read the day's news later, at a time more convenient for them. On the other hand, afternoon paper readers seemed not to want to read day-old news the following morning. This pattern is consistent with previous research on differences in reading times by publication cycle. It would be interesting if the same pattern of reading existed for the morning and evening papers before the switch, but that cannot be stated from the data presented here.

There is almost no evidence in this research to support the assertion that attributes of the editorial product are important factors in readers' choices of newspapers. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the two papers are very similar in their layout,

writing and editorial policies. However, even attributes such as completeness of business and sports coverage, which most observers would agree are natural advantages of a morning paper, did not appearto be systematically related to choice of paper.

It should be noted that the research was conducted just one month after the change in publication times. Readers' reactions to the two newspapers might become more sophisticated as they grow accustomed to them in their new time slots. Reading patterns may also change. While this research provides a picture of readers' initial reactions to the newspapers' trade of publication times, further research is needed to ascertain the long-range impact of this unique event.

References

1. Gerald Stone and John Windhauser, "Young Adults' Content Preferences Based on Morning vs. Evening Reading Time," Newspaper Research Journal, 4:9-22 (1983).

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3. Stone and Windhauser, op. cit.; Newspaper Advertising Bureau, The Daily Diet of News, (New York: NAB, 1978), pp. 13-15.

4. Stone and Windhauser, op. cit.

5. A notable exception would be readers in rural areas who received the morning Journal in the afternoon mail.

6. See for example, Judee K. Burgoon and Michael Burgoon, "Predictors of Newspaper Readership," Journalism Quarterly, 57:589-596 (1980).

TABLE 1

Demographic Description of the Sample*

Sex	Male	Percent = 44	N = 218
	Female	56	283
	Missing		4
Age	Under 35	27	131
	35 to 50	25	131
	51 to 65	21	101
	Over 65	24	117
	Missing		26
Education	High School or Less	41	206
	Some College	32	164
	College or More	26	133
	Missing		2
Income	Under $30,000	58	261
	$30,000 or More	42	187
	Missing		57

* Percentage calculations exclude missing values.

TABLE 2

Change in Time-of-Day Reading
by Reader Status
(in percent)

	Stayed with Journal	Switched to Journal	Stayed with Sentinel	Switched to Sentinel	(N)
Changed Time of Reading	50	23	39	15	(163)
Kept Old Time of Reading	50	77	61	85	(259)
(N)	(113)	(30)	(241)	(38)	(422)

Chi-Square = 17.97, $p < .001$

TABLE 3*

Reading at Delivery Time by Reader Status

(in percent)

	Stayed with Journal	Switched to Journal	Stayed with Sentinel	Switched to Sentinel	(N)
Reading at Delivery Time	59	60	35	37	(183)

Chi-Square = 22.45, $p < .001$

* The remainder (N = 241) did not read at time of delivery.

TABLE 4

Reading at Time Other Than Delivery
by Reader Status
(in percent)

	Stayed with Journal	Switched to Journal	Stayed with Sentinel	Switched to Sentinel	(N)
Reading at Time Other Than Delivery	18	23	29	32	
(N)	(20)	(7)	(70)	(12)	(109)

Chi-Square = 6.065, p < .11

*Remainder (N = 396) did not read at time other than delivery.

TABLE 5*

Reading at Time of Delivery
By Newspaper Read Five or More Times a Week
(in percent)

	Neither Paper	Journal Only	Sentinel Only	Both Papers	(N)
Reading at Time of Delivery	13	20	31	35	(206)

Chi-Square = 87.19, $p < .001$

* The remainder (N = 299) did not read at time of delivery.

TABLE 6*

Reading at Time Other Than Delivery
By Newspaper Read Five or More Times a Week
(in percent)

	Neither Paper	Journal Only	Sentinel Only	Both Papers	(N)
Reading at Time Other Than Delivery	21	17	31	19	(120)

Chi-Square = 9.07, $p < .05$

* The remainder (N = 385) did not read at time other than delivery.

TABLE 7

Overall Reaction to Switch

By Newspaper Read Five or More Times a Week

(in percent)

	Neither Paper	Journal Only	Sentinel Only	Both Papers	(N)
Reaction					
"Glad"	14	11	21	3	(67)
"Unhappy"	34	57	40	49	(199)
"Don't Care"	51	32	38	47	(187)
(N)	(90)	(75)	(201)	(87)	(453)

Chi-Square = 25.30, $p < .001$

TABLE 8

"Very Important" Reasons for Liking Newspapers
by Reader Status
(in percent)

	Stayed with Journal	Switched to Journal	Stayed with Sentinel	Switched to Sentinel	(N)
Time Of Delivery*	54	57	39	76	(202)
Quality Of National News	54	70	57	55	(241)
Quality Of Business News	30	17	25	37	(113)
Quality of Sports News	34	50	32	32	(143)
Coverage of Issues That Affect Your Community	77	77	73	76	(311)

Table 8 (Continued)

Interesting Feature Stories	50	28	49	51	(201)
Attractive Appearance**	39	21	33	22	(135)
Quality of Writing	67	62	72	62	(286)
Lack of Sensationalism	37	52	44	31	(167)
Good Variety of Opinion	64	59	63	53	(257)
Fairness to People in News	76	76	78	84	(323)
Quality of Investigative Reporting	65	76	68	75	(279)

* Chi-Square = 29.14, $p < .001$ ** Chi-Square = 13.09, $p < .05$

TABLE 9

Reader Status By Annual Family Income

(in percent)

	Up to $30,000	$30,000 and More	(N)
Stayed with Journal	32	21	(102)
Switched to Journal	4	10	(25)
Stayed with Sentinel	56	60	(216)
Switched to Sentinel	9	8	(32)
(N)	(217)	(158)	(375)

Chi-Square = 9.41, $p < .05$

TABLE 10

Reader Status By Sex

(in percent)

	Male	Female	(N)
Stayed with Journal	23	30	(113)
Switched to Journal	12	4	(30)
Stayed with Sentinel	56	58	(241)
Switched to Sentinel	10	8	(36)
(N)	(177)	(243)	(420)

Chi-Square = 12.67, $p < .01$